

SHIFTING FROM INVOLVEMENT TO ENGAGEMENT: STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES VIRTUALLY

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Abstract

The rapid shift to distance learning necessitates a change in how schools interact with families. Teachers that rely on traditional brick and mortar ways of working with families will be hard-pressed to engage families in student learning. On the other hand, teachers who enthusiastically shift to a family engagement approach understand how the digital classroom extends into the home. This article provides several strategies that teachers and teacher candidates might consider as they work with families in virtual learning spaces.

Keywords: family engagement, distance learning, teacher preparation

Increased technology use in schools is changing the way that students are learning (Lopez et al., 2017). While teachers and students were using technology for learning, the rapid shift to distance learning in March 2020 highlighted the increased need for schools to collaborate with stakeholders to ensure that students continue to learn (Reich et al., 2020). The transition was not smooth, because teachers discovered that traditional ways of teaching and learning, coupled with the need for family participation, did not consistently go as planned. In many instances, families were left in the dark, due to a lack of access to broadband internet (Young & Donovan, 2020), limited available technology (Hodges et al., 2020), and being unprepared for their new family-centered role in student learning. Research indicates that a keystone to student academic and social/emotional success often includes family engagement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Latunde, 2017; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Shumow & Schmidt, 2014). Family engagement views families as assets in student learning.

Often, teachers conceptualize families in an involvement role, relegating them to being present in a physical space (e.g., attending a meeting or conference), rather than seeing families in multifaceted ways of being engaged, including supporting and teaching their children (Baker et al., 2016). Working within a digital platform (e.g., distance learning, online learning) necessitates a shift in how teachers and families collaborate with each other. Special attention to how teachers can support families during distance learning is necessary. The purpose of this article is to highlight several strategies for engaging with families in a digital classroom. Children have a variety of individuals who care and support them; therefore, in this article, families are defined as the caregivers of children in the home.

Shifting to Family Engagement

The evolution of educational policy from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 to the most recent iteration of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 outlines guidance for student accountability and assessment, and the evaluation of teacher effectiveness. In 2002, for the first time, an iteration of the 1965 educational policy, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), included provisions for parent involvement in an effort to ensure notifications of school performance and subsequent choice in families selecting education spaces (i.e., school buildings, districts) for their children. While the NCLB legislation initiated a positive step toward connecting the home and school, there remained a lack of bidirectional communication and family engagement.

In 2015, the next iteration of educational policy, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was created, and it highlighted the need for stronger home, school, and community bonds that included guidelines for family engagement. The language in ESSA (2015) explicitly changed the term parent involvement to family engagement. Family engagement articulates to all stakeholders that families are a vital component of a school team and the learning environment (DeSpain et al., 2018). The goal of family engagement is for educators to create a bi-directional communication that necessitates that families participate in their children's education, including advocating and program decision making. The guiding principles that promote the shift to family engagement include: 1) school, family, and community share a responsibility for student learning, 2) family engagement spans across the child's life, and 3) family engagement is encouraged in multiple settings (e.g., home, school, community; Harvard Family Research Project, 2014).

As teachers and families establish shared communication, respect, and responsibility for student learning, the role that families play within the educational environment also shifts. Family engagement moves beyond a school-centric approach that views families from a deficit mindset to viewing families as an asset in a child's education. Table 1 illustrates the difference between parent involvement and family engagement. When families are engaged in their child's learning, they are responsible for significant educational decisions, and the views that families hold are valued by all members of the educational team.

Table 1

Family Involvement vs. Family Engagement

Family Involvement	Family Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher-centric approach. ● Families are not equipped to teach. ● Families are school visitors. ● Families receive <i>one-way</i> messages from the school. ● Families participate in school sanctioned parent and teacher groups (e.g., school-based parent organizations). ● Parents, parents and teachers teach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shared responsibility for student learning (e.g., family-school collaboration). ● Families are empowered to be teachers in the home. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teachers provide instructional models to follow (e.g., steps for teaching decoding multisyllabic words, solving multi-step equations). ○ Teachers provide explicit directions on how to complete assignments. ● Family feedback is valued and requested. ● Teachers and families regularly communicate with each other in the mode families select.

Family engagement is a thoughtful, time-taking endeavor that requires teachers to be intentional. There are several approaches that can ensure family engagement is present within the distance learning environment, including consistent communicating, thoughtful organizing of digital spaces, incorporating innovative activities, and considering care of the family.

Communicating

Family-school communication is vital within digital learning environments, especially considering that schools rely on families to provide support in online learning (Borup et al., 2019). Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs typically provide inadequate professional development on how to collaborate and communicate with families (Smith & Sheridan, 2019) in a manner that moves beyond viewing families through a single lens into understanding that families provide a connection to lifelong learning (Ferrara, 2011). In unidirectional communication, teachers report general information about classroom activities or individual student performance. Communicating within a virtual environment poses an even bigger conundrum, due in part to the limited visual interaction that often occurs when engaging in virtual communication.

Teachers provide feedback and updates through online communication with the family members that are providing a majority of the instructional support (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014), but families have little opportunity to engage in authentic communication. Engaging families ensures that they continue to be involved in the learning. Open collaboration requires that families share their preferred modes of communication, by selecting from a menu of choices, indicating availability and types of contact (e.g., email, text, calls). By providing choices, teachers empower families in ways to connect. Finally, family friendly teachers offer consistent office hours with a variety of options/time slots and include general housekeeping information.

Organizing

Distance learning requires students and families to access unfamiliar learning platforms. However, simply accessing the information does not equate to understanding. While there is much research supporting the idea that today's students are digital natives and their parents are digital immigrants (Prensky, 2009), the need for children to teach their parents how to navigate the online learning platforms can add tension to the family dynamics in the home (Nelissen & Van den Bulck, 2018). To help ease this burden, teachers can provide guidance on how the online content is organized. For example, providing clearly labeled folders or modules for each topic or area of instruction gives families a sharper understanding of the requirements of the class and where materials, videos and instructional supports are located. Videos that explain how to access the classroom website or learning platform, or introductory videos that provide an advanced organizer for families to understand the direction of learning for the week are helpful.

An easy way teachers can share their class page filing system is by recording a video of the computer screen, while explaining where files, due dates, contact information, and areas for work submission are located. Free programs that can be used for recording these videos include Screencast-O-Matic or ShowMe. Families may have multiple children in the home with multiple teachers using different online learning management systems. This can be extremely confusing and frustrating for families and students.

Families have had to shift to being the primary individuals providing support for instruction. Teachers can assist families in their new role by choosing a universal and understandable learning platform, such as Google Classroom or Microsoft Teams. In addition, there are a plethora of amazing online tools, but each one may come with its own username and password. To reduce possible tension in and among family members, teachers should minimize the use of several different digital tools.

Innovating

Building relationships is vital in all learning environments. At the forefront of teacher-student relationships is understanding the whole child, including any barriers accessing technology. Innovative teachers recognize that learners and their families need a variety of tools to ensure engagement. In a time where virtual or hybrid learning environments are necessary, these tools may also need to address gaps in technological proficiency, in content knowledge, and in learner confidence. Teachers who thoughtfully consider potential obstacles to learning, types of assignments that are being provided, and online tools can help families and teachers support learners in an uncertain time. Virtual innovation should not be limited to instruction, but should be used for family outreach, as well.

Teachers will find it challenging to provide hands-on activities that connect with lesson plans, or foster creativity with learners through the computer screen (Brown, 2020). A recent survey conducted by Phi Delta Kappa International (2020) found that high school students want their virtual classroom experiences to be more structured and interactive. While teachers are navigating unexpected issues in an unexpected time, they must be able to provide learning opportunities for their students in ways they will respond to, even when schools are closed, or the future of the school year is unknown. Teachers will need to spend time looking for digital tools that will make teaching and learning more efficient. To ensure that teaching and learning occur in a home environment, families must be included in these learning opportunities.

Even in a virtual environment, content should be presented in a number of ways, keeping in mind Wi-Fi issues that may exist. Educators can find a range of ways to boost student engagement with cloud-based apps. In addition, videoconferencing remains a strong option for communication with students, small groups, and students' families to gauge understanding, confidence, and support needed for virtual classroom success. It is important to remember home language variances and ways that curriculum can be presented that reflect an awareness of these needs. Finally, teachers must choose tools that will account for all learners, including those with special needs.

Caring for Caregivers

Stress is not new for teachers or for students. However, students and their families may be dealing with unprecedented stress at home that is crucial to the current teaching dynamic. Supporting students and their families begins with finding a centralized location for communication, or hub. A consistent location where announcements or emails to families can be found, along with instructions on assignment submissions, email communications with parents, and teacher contact information will relieve some anxiety. Examples of resources for this hub might include Canvas, Blackboard, Class Dojo, Padlet, or Google Classroom (Connections Academy, 2020).

Focusing on the child as a whole- not just the content they are learning or the products they submit- is necessary at a time when, for many, basic needs are not being filled. Families are dealing with loss of income, additional home instabilities, and sickness. School work is only a small part of their daily stress, so teachers must find time to engage with students and families to see how they can help or provide support. Group messaging tools can be used to send quick reminders or one-on-one communications. Creating a list of community resources for telehealth or ways to deal with anxiety or loss may be helpful, in addition to a list of organizations providing food or additional income sources to families in need.

Many parents or caregivers will feel the need to provide support for their learners but will lack resources or content knowledge to do so. In the current hybrid or virtual learning environment, it becomes even more important for teachers to provide background knowledge with websites like Khan Academy, BrainPop, or the Smithsonian Learning Lab. Podcasts, multimedia presentations with voiceover recording, or screen recording tools (i.e., Loom) can help parents support learners. Because parents do not have the same training as educators, who are taught to intentionally facilitate and support a child's development, it can be difficult for caregivers to understand how to frame or facilitate a learning activity (Todd, 2020). Therefore, teachers should take advantage of opportunities to model strategies (i.e., reading aloud, demonstrating phonetic spelling, or using open-ended, prompting questions). In addition, individualized support and feedback, as well as student

collaboration opportunities, will be even more important for learners to feel part of the classroom community, and successful in the work they are attempting on their own.

Teacher Candidate Preparation

Research has been underway for years regarding how to teach children in online classrooms (Koenig, 2020), but now is the time to realize the importance of preparing teachers to teach in remote settings. The unfortunate truth is that the sudden need for online instruction in K-12 systems has been a struggle for teachers. Most teachers have never received training in online instruction or received adequate preparation in the use of educational technologies (Koenig, 2020). Traditional preparation programs- even online preparation programs- usually focus on ensuring candidates are ready for a real-time, brick and mortar classroom teaching. A 2016 survey of teacher preparation programs found that only 4% of respondents offered field experiences in K-12 online settings (Koenig, 2020). If teacher training programs had not considered these types of experiences before the pandemic, now is the time to re-evaluate the need for this component in their current model. Because in-person family engagement currently looks very different, the tools and strategies used by the teacher must, as well.

While Pk-12 teachers are increasingly integrating online learning as an extension to face to face experiences, preparation programs have not yet caught up (Koehler and Farmer, 2020). Opportunities for more effectively teaching technological tools, online pedagogies, and lesson planning for remote instruction now abound. What does classroom management look like in a virtual classroom? How can teachers effectively assess learners and gather data to inform their instruction when they are communicating through a screen? How do teachers avoid a default busy-work mentality, and how can they effectively model strategies for learners remotely? How do they engage a family who is struggling to put food on the table? How do they communicate with families who have inconsistent or nonexistent technology? What can they do to enhance the confidence of families suddenly charged with facilitating teachers' plans for learning? These are just a few of the questions that teacher preparation programs now must answer through their curriculum. By prioritizing the changes in technology that exist in current teaching practices, preparation programs can be a strategic pipeline for ensuring current and future instructional needs are met. To be effective, this preparation must include tools for family engagement. The family engagement checklist provided in Figure 1 is a tool that teachers can use to ensure that family engagement is occurring. By considering these multiple aspects of family engagement, teachers can ensure that, while distance learning, families remain with students at the forefront of instruction.

Figure 1*Family Engagement Checklist*

Communication-Did I...?	Yes/No
Ask families their preferred method of communication (phone, text, email)	
Share my available times to be contacted	
Provide my return message policy to families	
Organization-Did I...?	
Create a video explaining the online classroom filing system	
Use a universal and understandable learning platform (Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, etc.)	
Minimize the use of multiple digital tools	
Innovation-Did I...?	
Consider alternate assignments for students without internet access	
Create lessons that include digital tools that enhance engagement	
Consider diverse learners needs	
Care-Did I...?	
Utilize a uniform communication hub	
Provide a list of local resources (telehealth, food bank, income assistance)	
Model teaching strategies and techniques	

Concluding Thoughts

Remote teaching and remote learning are uncharted territory for most students, teachers, and families. Virtual instructional practices range by teacher, campus, and district. Each household, and its ability to respond to those practices, also varies. While the need for virtual teaching has disrupted a sense of normalcy for teachers, the additional chaos that has resulted for families is more concerning. The sudden need for caregivers to also become teachers during the pandemic adds tremendous stress to the home. As teachers, strategic choices must be made regarding communication with families, organization of instructional materials, consistency in use of technology choices, and support for basic needs within the home. Educators must provide guidance through modeling, individualized feedback, and conferencing opportunities. Understanding the personal and professional impact that COVID-19 has had on families who may have already been struggling to meet basic needs is one responsibility of educators, and one that can be navigated with appropriate resources, time, and vigilance. The engagement of families in new and innovative ways is a true opportunity to facilitate authentic learning that extends well beyond the classroom into the home.

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